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## "Afterword"

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## "Afterword"

### By Cædmon Staddon

The preceding two papers discuss aspects of the Lheit-Lit'en experience, first with colonial domination, and more recently with the movement towards self governance. In this afterward I will briefly elaborate on some of the ideas and experiences expressed in the articles.

Few people clearly understand the size and diversity of First Nations societies inhabiting the land we call "Canada" (and for that matter the "United States of America"). Prior to the initiation of European expansionism in "North America", this continent was home to a bewildering number of diverse societies. Map 1 shows the general territorial extent of aboriginal peoples in Canada, denoted in this case by language groupings. From the Inuit of the Arctic to the Huron and Iroquois of the Great Lakes region; from the Innu of Labrador to the Salish and Haida of the Pacific coast, Canada was superimposed upon already verdant and long established social, economic, political and cultural geographies. While this map does not indicate the relative densities of aboriginal populations, it must be realized that in many communities north of the well-populated Canada-U.S. border region, native people often comprise the most significant part of local populations. Table 1 (showing the size of the Canadian aboriginal population in 1991) indicates that there are currently over 1 million

	1986	1991	% Change
NFLD	9,555	13,110	37
PEI	1,290	1,880	46
NS	14,225	21,885	54
NB	9,375	12,815	37
PQ	80,945	137,615	70
ONT	167,375	243,550	46
MAN	85,235	116,200	36
SASK	77,650	96,580	24
ALTA	103,925	148,220	43
BC	126,625	169,036	33
YUKON	4,995	6,390	28
NWT	30,530	35,390	16
CANADA	711,720	1,002,675	41

Table 1: Aboriginal Population in Canada (Source: *Native Issues Monthly*, 1(3))



aboriginal people in Canada, equivalent to roughly 4% of the entire national population. *Return to Balhats* points out something very important about the First Nations in Canada; despite their numbers, they have generally been invisible to the rest of Canadian society. Confined to reservations, residential schools, or to the "Skid Roads" of Canadian cities, native people have essentially had no part in Canadian cultural, political or economic life.

Indeed, native people were the last in the land to receive the franchise. *Return to Balhats* tells us some of the ways in which this colonial mentality was perpetuated. The Indian Act proclaimed by the Canadian Government early in the 20th century established native people as "wards of the state." For the pacification of its "wards" the federal government employed Indian Agents, who wielded enormous power in the allocation of resources (money, post secondary education, housing, etc.) and were even able to control many social relations. As *Return to Balhats* tells us, under the Indian Act, native women who married non-native men were stripped of their native status. This injustice meant that these women and their children, though they remained native in so many ways and therefore were sentenced to a lifetime's suffering of white prejudice and discrimination, could receive none of the benefits of the Indian Act.

For those on the reservations life was hardly better. Housing, provided by the government, has generally been scarce and of tremendously poor quality. With little economic opportunity on the reserves, and with little chance of breaking through workplace prejudice off the reserves, many aboriginal communities slipped into degradation and despair. Until the late 1960s it was still common practice for native children to be taken from their families to the missionary run "residential schools" for white education and socialization.<sup>6</sup> Native children were forbidden on pain of corporal punishment, to speak their cradle languages or behave in the ways of their homes and communities. We know now too that many of the Christian Brothers who ran the schools systematically practiced other forms of physical and sexual abuse on the children.<sup>7</sup> Since native people were "invisible," so too were the crimes committed against them, no matter how egregious or savage. All of this contributed to what *Return to Balhats* calls "the spinning vortex of our near-destruction."

While all of these debilities certainly took their toll, there is a further measure that perhaps was the most ultimately damaging of all. As successive Canadian governments and commercial interests were pushing native communities onto ever smaller, more marginal reserves, federal and provincial legislation outlawed forms of native self government, such as the "potlatch" or "balhats." With their political and social core torn away from them, aboriginal peoples were rendered increasingly unable to address the other threats to their existence.

This then marks the significance of the *Return to Balhats*; for it is nothing less than a restoration of the very foundations of aboriginal political and social consciousness. As indicated in the "Declaration of the Lheit Lit'en Nation," the Lheit Lit'en are reclaiming their cultural inheritance, creating new forms of self governance that will "collectively advance and protect aboriginal title rights and treaty rights in Canada." They seek also to "reaffirm [their] place in the international community of nations with dignity." As Christensen points out, though, this movement can only take place in the context of negotiations with the Canadian government and DINA, which still seek to impose alien and colonially minded forms of governance.<sup>8</sup> But the Lheit Lit'en, as well as the Nisga'a, the Nuuchah-Nulth, the Gitskan-Wet'suwet'un and other First Nations in British Columbia and across Canada, are moving ahead with self government initiatives. These range from the establishment of "sentencing circles" for local administration of judicial matters, natural resource management plans and the settlement of land claims. The very recent establishment of the autonomous region of "Nunavut" in the Northwest Territories is also an important step forward. Federal and provincial politicians are evidently hearing the public opinion polls that indicate that over 70% of Canadians want to see either comprehensive land claims negotiations, or the immediate ratification of aboriginal demands.<sup>9</sup>

#### Suggestions for Further Reading

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted with permission from *Return to Balhats*, prepared by the Lheit-Lit'en Nation, 1992 (British Columbia, Canada).

<sup>2</sup> The Indian Act and other related issues are discussed in the Afterward to this essay

<sup>3</sup> This statement pertains to the legal status given by the Canadian government to aboriginal people, a topic discussed in the Afterword.

<sup>4</sup> Paper reprinted with permission from *Native Issues Monthly*, 1(3) 1993.

<sup>5</sup> The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (DINA) was established by the Canadian Government to administer the federal Indian Act.

<sup>6</sup> See Cardinal 1969.

<sup>7</sup> Since the mid 1980s trial of several Brothers at Newfoundland's Mt. Cashel Orphanage literally *thousands* of cases of physical and sexual abuse have come to light.

<sup>8</sup> It must be remembered that, even in the flurry of policy proclamations, White Papers and Royal Commissions, the general perspective of the Canadian legal and political establishment may not have changed much. For example, in his 1991 ruling on the Gitskan Wet'suwet'un land claim case, B.C. Supreme Court Justice Alan McEachern not only denied the petition for aboriginal title; he also added a judicial addendum in which he criticised the native petitioners for not having fully assimilated themselves into mainstream Canadian society

<sup>9</sup> *Native Issues Monthly*, 1(3) 1992, p.53.